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Auschwitz as a Site of Memory

Emma Needham

Auschwitz is known as the most substantial site of the Holocaust namely because Auschwitz-Birkenau was the largest concentration camp in Europe, and it is estimated that about 960,000 Jews and 125,000 others were murdered there.¹ Not only was the process of creating the memorial at Auschwitz filled with controversies, but the site also remains questionable today with regards to dark tourism, or thanatourism, “the tourism of death.”² For some, the thought of traveling to a place subsumed in death and despair sounds troubling as the consumption of dark tourism involves a process of “confronting, understanding and accepting death.”³ Disputes and questions have existed in cooperation with Auschwitz as a site of public memory from the time the idea to create a memorial arose until the present day. One of the largest disputes includes the issue of involvement in the camp. Robert Jan Van Pelt questions the necessity of tampering with Auschwitz in his article, asking, “Should we not just acknowledge the radical ‘otherness’ of the place, and allow it to be?”⁴ This paper argues that Auschwitz as a site of public memory has been, and will be, the source of many controversies. The museum of Auschwitz does exist and is still standing for the purpose of educating others about the atrocities of what happened while the camp was functioning. While the museum’s educational mission is not purely exclusive to Auschwitz, it is successful.

Auschwitz began its transformation into a museum relatively early. In May of 1945, the Polish government gave the Ministry of Culture and Art the rights over parts of the camp and instructed them to prepare concepts for the upcoming museum, which former prisoners carried out.⁵ A group of those prisoners who were a part of

¹ “Holocaust Encyclopedia,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*.

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005189> (accessed April 16, 2014).

² Derek Dalton, “Encountering Auschwitz: A Personal Ruminations on the Possibilities and Limitations of Witnessing/ Remembering Trauma in Memorial Space,” *Crime Scene*, no. 13 (2009): 188.

³ Philip Stone and Richard Sharpley, “Consuming Dark Tourism: A Thanatological Perspective,” *Annals of Tourism Research*, no. 35 (2008): 587.

⁴ Robert Jan van Pelt, “Of Shells and Shadows: A Memoir on Auschwitz,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, no. 13 (2003): 381.

⁵ “From Liberation to the Opening of the Memorial,” *Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau*. 6.

the National People's Council (KRN) approved a legislative initiative on February 1, 1946 intending to create the site as a place "to commemorate Polish and international martyrdom."⁶ This statement in itself can be viewed as a sense of controversy, and similar feelings remain visible today. Many Jews are often upset about the lack of sympathy and recognition they see from the Poles. Even on the fiftieth anniversary of liberation in 1995, Polish-Jewish tension increased throughout the ceremonies in Auschwitz. At the official observances, President Lech Walesa refused to recognize the Holocaust, and at a ceremony in Krakow, Walesa only mentioned the attempts to destroy Poland, and said nothing about the Jews.⁷ Even so, the camp continued its transformation in June 1946, when many belongings of the murdered victims were found and converted over to museum exhibits.⁸

While visiting Auschwitz was possible in 1945, it was restricted to organized groups and ceremonies. The next year, though, visitors totaled around 100,000 and increased to 170,000 the following year.⁹ The Polish parliament passed a law on July 2, 1947 that governed the museum's operations, and the official opening was on June 14, 1947, the seventh anniversary of the Polish political prisoners' first arrival to the camp.¹⁰ In July 1947, Jewish representatives noted their approval of the unfinished exhibition, but felt that there should be elaboration in the exhibit on the destruction of Jews. These requests went unanswered and nothing ever came of the proposed "Museum of Jewish Martyrdom" on the site.¹¹ Within the first ten years of the museum's existence, over two million people visited the site, fluctuating in different numbers each year.¹²

In the 1950s, the memorial had major problems with funding. Buildings in the exhibition were in danger of collapsing, but there was no money for preservation.¹³ This problem not only raised the question of funding, but also the controversial topic of restoring the buildings, which remains a subject of debate today. In 1963, the program for maintenance and preservation of Birkenau officially went into effect,

http://en.auschwitz.org/m/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=227&Itemid=13&limit=1&limitstart=5 (accessed April 9, 2014).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Van Pelt, "Of Shells and Shadows," 383-384.

⁸ "From Liberation," 6.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "The First Years of the Memorial," *Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau*, 2.

http://en.auschwitz.org/m/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=228&Itemid=13&limit=1&limitstart=3 (accessed April 10, 2014).

¹² "The First Years of the Memorial," 4.

¹³ "The First Years of the Memorial," 4.

only to continue the question of preservation.¹⁴ Restoring or recreating buildings popular to the environment of dark tourism sites can be debatable. Some scholars believe that, “while lending an air of realism, [these techniques] might actually work to distance the tourist from the event.”¹⁵ Even though these recreations of original buildings are meant to act as an authentic experience, some tourists might feel a detachment from them, knowing that they are, in fact, not authentic. This problem arose again in 1993, when an international conference was held regarding whether or not to preserve the relics.¹⁶ The participants in this conference were stuck within the multiple functions and meanings of Auschwitz: a site of mass tourism, a Polish museum, and a cemetery.¹⁷

Many museum specialists, scholars and even tourists debate whether or not restoration and recreation should be acceptable at the sites of Auschwitz and Birkenau. Some groups feel that if this event was such a terrible travesty, the sites should not be preserved. Others believe that preserving or recreating the buildings and landscapes works for educational purposes, and attracts tourists. Even though the committees created to ensure the preservation of buildings attempted to bring a sense of realism to Auschwitz, there are those that believe no realism is possible. Jorge Semprun, a veteran who was sent to Buchenwald realized that when he tried to explain, “what it was like, [he] realized that it was beyond communication.”¹⁸ According to the “Dark Tourism Spectrum,” Auschwitz is a much darker site than the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. because, while the D.C. museum is a site “associated with death,” Auschwitz is “of death” due to its authenticity.¹⁹ Even though there is a desire to recreate that realism that existed when the site was functioning as a camp, rebuilding the barracks may not be an overall effective strategy to convey the feelings of that time period.

One proposal from the government in the 1950s included limiting the Museum to “a single row of blocks,” while adapting all other buildings as housing.²⁰ This brings up a topic that remains of interest today, although not within Auschwitz. People currently reside at the former French deportation camp, Drancy, which was

¹⁴ “Memorial Timeline,” *Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau*, 4.

http://en.auschwitz.org/m/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=226&Itemid=13&limit=1&limitstart=3 (accessed April 17, 2014).

¹⁵ Erika M. Robb, “Violence and Recreation: Vacationing in the Realm of Dark Tourism,” *Anthropology & Humanism*, no. 34 (2009): 55.

¹⁶ Van Pelt, “Of Shells and Shadows,” 380.

¹⁷ Van Pelt, “Of Shells and Shadows,” 381.

¹⁸ Van Pelt, “Of Shells and Shadows,” 382.

¹⁹ Philip R. Stone, “A Dark Tourism Spectrum: Towards a Typology of Death and Macabre Related Tourist Sites, Attractions and Exhibitions,” *Tourism*, no. 54 (2006): 152.

²⁰ “The First Years of the Memorial,” 4.

made up of a U-shaped apartment building. The question is raised even today; should people live in areas that were former camps of tragedy, or should they be evacuated and used as museums or even torn down? Regarding Auschwitz, the government continually postponed museum projects, and focused on limiting its activities rather than helping to expand it.²¹ With the dedication of the museum staff, though, the exhibition was officially completed in 1955.²²

One topic that was mentioned in the press in 1947 included the proposition of moving the main museum to Birkenau, where most of the killing was performed.²³ This proposal continues to be discussed today for reasons including the misunderstanding that Auschwitz and Birkenau are the same site, and that the main museum in Auschwitz suggests that Polish suffering is more important than Jewish suffering.²⁴ In order to address these issues, plans were recommended in 1996 to either move the visitor center from Auschwitz to a place between Auschwitz and Birkenau, or to move the main museum as a whole to Birkenau.²⁵ Over the years, attempts to enforce the 1962 “Quiet Zone, the 1977 Protective Zone, the 1979 Unesco Zone, and the 1984 Exclusion Zone,” failed due to the locality surrounding the museum.²⁶ The Protective Zone was placed around Birkenau in 1964, and was expanded by the government in 1977 in order to prepare it to be a UNESCO World Heritage Site.²⁷ Although the local authorities protected the zone, institutions outside of Poland had more say in the museum and the extent of the zone.²⁸ The town of Os´wiecim flourished after the war, adding new markets, which increased “privatization and marketization.”²⁹ Because of the growing town, conflicts that appeared throughout the 70s and 80s included boundaries and land use debates regarding Auschwitz.³⁰ In 1974 a committee was set up to resolve conflicts between the town and museum over developments, and in 1997 an international agreement

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ “The First Years of the Memorial,” 7.

²⁴ Van Pelt, “Of Shells and Shadows,” 385.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Van Pelt, “Of Shells and Shadows,” 389.

²⁷ Andrew Charlesworth, Alison Stenning, Robert Guznik, & Michal Paszkowski, “‘Out of Place’ in Auschwitz? Contested Development in Post-War and Post-Socialist Os´wiecim,” *Ethics, Place and Environment*, no. 9 (2006): 153-154.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Charlesworth et. al., “Out of Place,” 153.

³⁰ Charlesworth et. al., “Out of Place,” 154.

was made to create a plan for the future of the museum on the basis of having a “symbiosis between a well-managed museum and a prosperous community.”^{31,32}

Another large controversy regarding Auschwitz and Poland concerns Polish-Jewish relations. From the very beginning of the memorial to the present day, relations between the two communities have incited debates and controversies within the country of Poland. The belief that Polish suffering is more important to teach than Jewish suffering in the Holocaust is one that is constantly pressured, and certain events have caused explosions of huge debates. The competition of victimization and having distinct separations between victim identities is a more recent aspect of debate. John Beech states that, “In the case of Auschwitz-Birkenau an even stronger current dichotomy is emerging, with the victims being presented as either Poles or Jews, only very rarely as Polish Jews.”³³

This topic is not the only issue causing problems in relations. On July 14, 1989, a group of Jews led by a New York rabbi were thrown from the grounds of a Carmelite convent by Polish locals.³⁴ The Carmelite convent was just on the perimeter of the barbed wire at Auschwitz, and was housed in a two-story brick building that was used by the Nazis for the storage of Zyklon B gas.³⁵ The Jewish group was protesting the failure to relocate the convent, which had been formerly agreed five years prior.³⁶ Four years later, in 1993, the convent was still located at the site until Pope John Paul II ordered the nuns to move in order resolve the controversy before the fiftieth anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising.³⁷ The Pope feared that another boycott would incite violence on the anniversary weekend.³⁸ Beyond the debates that arise in Poland, there is an issue because there are not many Jews in Poland to raise their concerns. Before the war, on the day of the occupation, “3.3 million Jews lived in Poland,” comprising about ten percent of

³¹ Van Pelt, “Of Shells and Shadows,” 389.

³² Charlesworth et. al., “Out of Place,” 154.

³³ John Beech, “The Enigma of Holocaust Sites as Tourist Attractions – The Case of Buchenwald,” *Managing Leisure*, no. 5 (2000): 36.

³⁴ Michael C. Steinlauf, “Memory Offended; The Auschwitz Convent Controversy,” *American Jewish History*, no. 82 (1994): 385.

³⁵ Jane Perlez, “Pope Orders Nuns out of Auschwitz,” *The New York Times*, April 15, 1993, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/15/world/pope-orders-nuns-out-of-auschwitz.html> (accessed April 17, 2014).

³⁶ Steinlauf, “Memory Offended,” 385.

³⁷ Perlez, “Pope Orders Nuns.”

³⁸ Ibid.

Poland's population.³⁹ Today, that number has dropped to 3,200, or .01%, of Poland's population.⁴⁰ There are not enough Jewish voices in Poland to express concern.

In 2013, tensions were tight between the Poles and Jews over the kosher slaughtering of animals. The issue arose due to the Polish law that mandates the stunning of animals before they are slaughtered, while kosher rules forbid it.⁴¹ While this was not a direct debate over Auschwitz or the Holocaust, it does deal with Jewish religious issues, possibly displaying the potential feelings between the Poles and Jews over their views of the genocide. Jews in Israel and America were quick to respond to the issue, which caused Poles to react within the spectrum of "defensiveness to outright Anti-Semitic rhetoric."⁴² Currently, the case is still under debate, but kosher meat has been exported from Poland, suggesting that kosher slaughter is taking place, regardless of the law.⁴³ These issues connect directly with Auschwitz and the fact that it is a site of public memory. It is a difficult truth that these issues between the Poles and Jews could interfere with the museum, which should be a site for all victims, not one over the other. When these two groups should be working together for humanity's sake, they continue to argue over the victims and how the museum should be presented in their favor.

The museum that has been made of Auschwitz has a clear mission, and it is a somewhat new undertaking. While the mission of the museum was originally one of memorializing, it has now shifted to an educational approach.⁴⁴ Part of this shift can be attributed to the more recent changing generations. While past generations have

³⁹ "The Fate of the Jews Across Europe: Murder of the Jews of Poland," *Yad Vashem*, <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/about/09/poland.asp> (accessed April 18, 2014).

⁴⁰ "Jewish Population of the World (1882-Present)," *Jewish Virtual Library*, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/jewpop.html> (accessed April 18, 2014).

⁴¹ Gosia S. Weiss, "Polish-Jewish Relations: The Real Victim of the Ritual Slaughter Controversy," *jns.org*, August 15, 2013, <http://www.jns.org/latest-articles/2013/8/15/polish-jewish-relations-the-real-victim-of-the-ritual-slaughter-controversy#.U1CAhl4kiWF> (accessed April 11, 2014).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Cnaan Liphshiz, "Lies, Silence Surround Flouting of Poland's Kosher Slaughter Ban," *jta.org*, February 27, 2014, <http://www.jta.org/2014/02/27/news-opinion/world/lies-silence-surround-flouting-of-polands-kosher-slaughter-ban> (accessed April 17, 2014).

⁴⁴ Michael Kimmelman, "Auschwitz Shifts from Memorializing to Teaching," *The New York Times*, February 18, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/19/arts/19auschwitz.html?pagewanted=1&r=0&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1397418349-PhnXENyYKI/OffRUGvqJeg> (accessed April 13, 2014).

had closer ties and experiences with the Holocaust, these newer generations are more removed, and therefore may be less connected and informed about Auschwitz and its inner functioning. The official website explains one of the museum's key objectives as training the teachers of a new generation in order to "shape individual and collective memory about the victims of genocide."⁴⁵ The mission of Auschwitz is to teach individuals about the Holocaust so that they will recognize the need for mutual respect throughout the world.⁴⁶

Although this recent shift is still being worked on, Auschwitz certainly fulfills its educational mission. While the memorializing aspect of the museum is still present, there is a clear focus on how the camp worked, what people of the time may have had to experience, and more emphasis on choices prisoners had to make in their everyday lives. That being said, this mission is not one that is necessarily unique to Auschwitz. Holocaust education can take place anywhere in the world, particularly if educators and museums have the funding to acquire authentic items from the camps. What is authentic to Auschwitz is the memorial aspect. Auschwitz is the site where over a million people died, and as such it is essentially a cemetery, a sacred place. Remembering and honoring the victims is an experience that is probably different in Auschwitz than any other Holocaust museum, given the nature and scale of what happened there.

After seeing Auschwitz, how do I continue? This is a difficult question to answer because it was a very different experience than how I imagined it would be, and I left not with a feeling of misery, but one of pride. I mourned the victims of the tragedy, which was one of my main reasons for going to Auschwitz, but I also brought a light to this dark place. I walked through the camps as a free Jew knowing that I would be able to exit and return to my normal life at home. This is where I agree with Derek Dalton, who says, "I was tormented by the sense that I was leaving the camp complex strangely unenlightened," and the true realization I felt that, "[o]ur out-of-wartime temporality" cannot begin to capture the many horrors that existed within the camp.⁴⁷ While the camp was an incredibly important experience, I did not find it as difficult to go through as I imagined. I think I felt this way because Auschwitz really did feel like a museum, from the recreated barracks and death wall to the tourists and gift shops. In a way, one of my fears was confirmed, that "Holocaust tourism reduc[ed] the death and torture of others, no longer present into

⁴⁵ "Mission Statement," *Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau*, http://en.auschwitz.org/e/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2&Itemid=7 (accessed April 15, 2014).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Dalton, "Encountering Auschwitz," 217, 218.

a spectacle.”⁴⁸ I recognize the need for the museum and site, and am thankful that it is there and continually maintained, but I just expected a different experience. I now realize that no matter how hard I try to relate to the horrors of the Holocaust, I will never fully understand. Perhaps no human should ever be able to understand such absence of humanity.

I remember thinking, as I walked through the camp, how horrible it would be if this genocide existed today, but of course it does. People may not think about it, but this hatred and annihilation is not over. Auschwitz has changed me in causing me to realize that I need to stop focusing so much on the past and trying to feel things that I will not be able to, and try to make changes now and for future generations. The Holocaust was a terrible thing, and I will always remember, but now that I have experienced all that I have in my Holocaust studies, I want to now dedicate my energy to focusing on areas of the world that are desperate for help, and Jews like those in France who are fleeing for fear of their lives. That same hate has not left this world, so it is tremendously important for today’s generation to remember and do something about it.

⁴⁸ Tim Cole, “(Re)visiting Auschwitz: (Re)encountering the Holocaust in its Landscapes,” *Cultural History*, no. 2 (2013): 232.

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